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ABSTRACT

One of the most important elements in arranging an optimal learning environment for young children is helping parents become partners in their children's learning. To promote this partnership teachers must keep parents informed about the program and their children's progress within it. Such exchanges can be accomplished in a variety of ways, including informal sharing and reporting, telephone contacts, parent conferences, formal and informal parental observations of their children, written messages, newsletters, parent participation activities, and written progress reports. Teachers, by virtue of their training and experience, have a responsiblity for sharing their knowledge and expertise in order to help parents learn more about children in general, although they must never attempt to dictate how parents should be raising their own children. Responding to parents' requests for help (whether direct or indirect, formal or informal) has always been part of the preschool and day care teacher's professional responsibility. When a problem exists that parents do not recognize, it must be brought up with tact and careful forethought in the privacy of a conference. Under no circumstances, however, should teachers label or diagnose. Of course, teachers must take precautions in reporting suspected child abuse. They also need to obtain feedback from parents, know how to conduct parent meetings, and respond to parent complaints. (RH)

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THE PARENT-TEACHER PARTNERSHIP IN PROGRAMS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

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Early Childhood Education: The Parent-Teacher Partnership

When arranging good learning environments for young children, teachers must view parents as partners in their child's learning experiences; in fact, parents should be viewed as the senior members of the partnership. Thus, learning to interact effectively with parents is an important set of skills that preschool or daycare teachers must be expanding and refining throughout their teaching career. Only as good, active, ongoing relationships are established between teachers and parents can the school or daycare center provide the child with a truly optimum learning environment.

A young child coming to school for the first time is exected to make a series of adjustments to expectations that may be quite different from expectations in the home. The child is expected to learn to live, as it were, in two worlds, to adapt to two sets of adults - parents and teachers - who may hold quite different expectations. The child's parents, however, are the ones who continue to carry the primary responsibility for the child's overall socialization and well-being. It is they, too, who will provide a continuity of support and a fixed value system as the child moves through the years of schooling beginning with this first experience in the early education center. In order to interact effectively with parents, teachers must continuously work at understanding not only what parents want for their children, but also what they want from the school; what contributions they feel that they, as parents, can make to their child's learning experience, and what shortcomings or anxieties they may be feeling about this new experience upon which their child is embarking. Almy (1975) noted that when teachers and parents share their understanding of the child and agree on a direction for that child's learning and development the chances for a good educational beginning are greatly increased (p. 167).

In the early days of the child study movement, and especially in the heyday

of the laboratory nursery schools, teachers were viewed as the experts in child development whose job it was to teach parents what was "good" for children. Rarely did teachers view parents as individuals who, because they knew their child better than any one else were, therefore, an invaluable source of information useful to teachers in programming for that child more effectively. It must be remembered, trite as it may sound, that parents are a child's first teachers and the family environment does provide the child's first learning experiences. Parents' methods of teaching their children vary markedly, to be sure. Hess (1969) was one of the first to note these differences in maternal teaching style in a review of several studies conducted in the early 1960's in which middle class and poverty level parents were compared. It appeared that middle class mothers tended to subtly prompt and cue their children more, provide directions that were clearer and more specific, give elaborated reasons and explanations, and to praise or otherwise encourage their child's efforts.

White and Watts (1973) also carried out an interesting series of studies on young children in the home setting to attempt to ascertain what maternal characteristics produced "competent" young children. Though the number of children studied was relatively small (31), White and Watts offer some tentative conclusions, among them that the mother's direct and indirect interactions with her very young child was the most powerful formative factor in the child's development.

Rarely, however, did these mothers of competent children engage in direct lesson-giving. Instead they appeared to be teaching "on the fly" as they went about their household and child care chores. These exchanges, naturally occurring and usually child-initiated, and seldom lasting more than a very few minutes, seem to result in an enormous amount of teaching on the part of the mother

(White, 1971, p. 87). Socioeconomic status did not appear to be a valid predictor of a mother's competency in fostering good development in her child, nor was a two parent (father present) family a predictor of maternal competency.

Other studies conducted at about the same time looked at such things as variations in types of home learning opportunities provided the young in the home. Hale (1980) comments on some of these differences as she contrasts black and white child rearing styles that may affect child learning. She suggests that black children are brought up to be more people-oriented and tend to explore their human environment as they are passed from lap to lap. In contrast, white children are given more manipulative toys and thus discover various more inanimate attributes and relationships as they play with their toys alone in a play pen. Young (19) suggests that the greater "people-orientation" may account, too, for the seeming indifference that some black children show toward the object-oriented learning devices found in traditional classrooms. She was referring to books, manipulative materials, and learning kits which are so familiar to young white children because these are the kinds of learning materials found in white middle class homes. With classrooms that are object-oriented, says Young, the affective needs of black children are not being met, thereby explaining why some teachers complain that black children, instead of working independently, cling to the teacher.

While these are only a few of the examples that might be given to illustrate how an underlying cultural difference can affect child-learning, such differences are a concern of all racial and ethnic minorities. At the White House Conference on Families (1980), black, Hispanic, Native-American and Asian American delegates at all three conference locations (Baltimore, Minneapolis, Los Angeles) called for multi-cultural and multi-lingual educational policies. Certainly such a charge has first hand implications for preschool and daycare teachers. These are the adults who are often the young child's first significant and

continuing contact with a learning environment which may be markedly different from that which they have experienced within the family setting. It is the early childhood teacher who must help the child to build the first bridge between the values of home and the immediate culture, and the expectations of school and society at large. During the bridge building process, however, it must be remembered too, that the child coming into an early childhood program for the first time already has a long history of learning, and that the family is a potent force in that history. Teachers must develop a responsiveness to family background and values and to what the child's parents consider important learnings if the child is to be provided with an optimum learning environment.

Sharing Information

From the foregoing discussion, it is obvious that a primary responsibility of the preschool and daycare center is to receive and impart information about each child. Such exchanges can be accomplished through reports, conferences, observations, and brief, incidental exchanges. The teachers' knowledge of child development must be shared with parents, and the parents' knowledge about their child needs to be shared with the teachers. Expectations for the child in the home setting and those in the school must be shared too, for these may be at odds with each other. For example, at school a child may be expected to hang her coat in her cubbie each time she takes it off; at home, other things are demanded of the child that parents considered far more important. Sharing information, even about something as simple as hanging up a coat, must be an ongoing part of the program.

Informal Sharing and Reporting

A tremendous amount of valuable exchanges of information can go on in the brief casual encounters that occur in programs where parents deliver and pick up their own children or where parents share in driving a car pool at

frequent intervals. Some of these exchanges may have to do with specific issues, perhaps the course of a new medication regimen. Each morning the parent reports the effects of the medication on the child's behavior at home; the teacher, at the close of each school session reports on the child's behavior at school that day. On the other hand, the exchanges can be general, spontaneous, and more in the nature of simple trading of social pleasantries. In order to take full advantage of these brief opportunities for valuable parent-teacher exchanges, it is important that one teacher be assigned specifically to the role of greeting and bidding good-bye to children and parents. It is also important that arrival and departure times be extended over a 15 or 20 minute period if at all possible so that each child and parent can be greeted warmly with a moment or two left over for a brief chat. So arranged, arrival time can be a time for the parent to report events that may have an effect on the child's schoolday: Jonthan had a hard time getting up this morning because they all went to the airport last night to pick up Father and Jonathan got to bed really late. During these brief moments at the beginning or end of the day, the teacher also may ask questions about the child, or make comments designed to elicit information: what the doctor had to say about the child's allergies? whether the family had a good time on their trip? or just some common everyday things that the teacher knew had been troubling Jonathan: has the family dog returned? was the tricycle retrieved?

Passing the information on to the other teachers is another responsibility of the teacher who greets the children. If all teachers know that a child is tired from the trip to the airport they can alter their expectations appropriately. In addition, they also may be able to use the information to prompt the child to share the airport experience with other children at some appropriate time during the school day. One way to be sure that the information is shared is

for the teacher in charge of arrivals to go around and report to each of the other teachers how many children are present, which children are absent, and any special news or instructions about particular children. In an all-day program, other ways must be found to convey such information, especially in programs where the late day teachers do not overlap with the early morning teachers. Certainly there is nothing more aggravating for a parent who has carefully explained to the receiving teacher the rash on the child's back and how it is to be treated to return in the evening to find that the news has not been passed on. Even more aggravating is to find that not only has the late afternoon teacher not received the information, but also assumes the responsibility of informing the parent of the rash and discomfort. If the child has been extremely uncomfortable, the teacher may inform in a fashion that appears slightly aggreived, and the parent may respond with a show of irritation. To avoid such situations, a formal communication system between staff members must be established.

Departure time is another valuable period for sharing information about the child. This is the ideal time for the teacher to report good things that happened to the child that day: "Kim climbed all the way to the top of the jungle gym;" or "Joey knows the colors of every crayon in the box." Such appreciative comments made by teachers to the parent in the presence of the child has several important effects. They help parents learn to appreciate the fact that seemingly small events are important developmental gains and they convey to the child that what he or she has accomplished must be good and important if teacher passes the news to mother and <u>both</u> of these important adults appear pleased. Furthermore, such positive exchanges when initiated by the teacher in a genuine fashion and on a regular basis are highly instrumental in building and maintaining a good rapport with the parent. Finally, for those parents or children who may be somewhat unsure of themselves (for whatever reason) such positive reporting within the earshot of other parents

and children is a fine way to help raise self-esteem.

At no time, however, should a teacher in these open situations discuss any problems a child may exhibit, nor should the teacher allow parents to discuss negative aspects of their child's home or neighborhood behavior. Even if the teacher moves the conversation out of earshot, the child, out of the strong egocentrism characteristic of the three, four, and five year olds, is likely to wonder what he or she has done wrong to cause the teacher and parent to look so worried. Even when a serious discussion is not focused on the child, but instead perhaps has to do with another member of the family, the child assumes that he or she is the focus and anxieties mount. Thus, the teacher at the very outset of any such discussion must tactfully turn the parent away from the topic with the assurance that the teacher will call at a specific time that very day or evening to talk the matter over and to arrange a conference if needed. If the matter is to be handled by telephone, it is wise to plan with the parent a time to make the call when the child is occupied elsewhere, safely out of earshot of the telephone.

A child's products - paintings, block buildings, a science "experiment" - may be shown occasionally at this time, too. Though the emphasis throughout most preschool activities is on the learning process itself (rather than on a finished product as the ultimate good) there are times when it is important to discuss a child's product. Noteworthy, perhaps, is the five year old who finally let himself go at the easel and used every color to make a painting of great, wide, broad stripes; or the new child who stuck with one of the hardest puzzles and finished it, all 24 pieces; or the child who can now say all the letters in her name. Again, such comments help parents to recognize salient dimensions of their child's learning activities, and their developmental importance. The comments also provide models that may aid parents in learning to verbalize their own appreciation of their child's accomplishments.

Casual, brief exchanges such as those just described are yet one more way too, of helping parents and children feel successful and good about the preschool experience.

The type of information exchanged in the presence of children and other parents must be brief and public in nature. Teachers must never ask personal questions or touch upon areas that may be sensitive to the parent. Discussion of such issues, if they are relevant to the child's performance in the school setting must be handled in the privacy of a parent conference. If parents attempt to talk about their own personal affairs during these public times teachers must school themselves to respond neutrally or not at all. "Not hearing" can often be accomplished by turning to greet another parent who has just arrived or by busily helping children get their coats on. Obviously, teachers never initiate with parents a discussion of any other parent nor do they respond when parents comment unfavorably about other parents or the affairs of other parents. The same holds true of discussions about children. Teachers never discuss any child negatively with other parents.

Telephone Contacts

In many situations children are not delivered and picked up by their parents. In such situations brief and fairly frequent phone calls can facilitate a positive relationship between parents and teachers. These calls should be on the level of those that occur face to face between teachers and parents at arrival and departure time: incidental reporting on the child's positive performances, exchange of pleasantries, notice of forthcoming school events and inquiries about family events of concern to the teacher and child. The telephone is also a means for teachers to help parents to monitor such things as the effects of medication on the child's behavior in school or to assist

parents in maintaining other kinds of home programs. One program that readily comes to mind that was handled entirely by telephone was the effort to help a foster mother work through on a bedwetting problem in a five year old who was one of her several charges. The foster mother felt she could no longer keep the child because of the extra work involved in having to change the bed each morning. It was a sad state of affairs in that the child, who had been in a series of foster homes seemed, in the current home, to be thriving for the first time. Following medical consultation that ruled out a physciological basis for the problem, the nurse and the teacher worked out a program with the mother. To help the mother maintain the program the teacher or the nurse called each day to get a report of a wet or dry bed and to plan for the next day. The problem was solved: the child did remain in the home and the foster mother, who was seldom able to get away from home, appeared to regard the brief daily phone call as a pleasing source of special attention.

Another important use of the telephone is to report minor accidents (bruises, scratches, fights) or any other untoward event such as torn clothing, a toilet mishap (in the usually continent child) or a lost jacket or "treasure." If the child is bussed or car pooled, it is important to get the information to the parent <u>before</u> the child reaches home. Giving advance notice, that is, preparing the parent for what may be for them an unpleasant surprise, even a shock, helps to "defuse" the situation, enabling the parent to handle the situation more matter-of-factly when the child arrives home. In addition, the teacher's assurance to the child that "I will call your mother and tell her how your new pants got torn," may go a long way in helping allay the child's anxieties about, as one child put it, "catching whatfor" when he got home. In fact, this strategy of giving advance notice about an untoward event is equally valuable to use with the parent who pick up in person, too. Teachers must be aware that what they consider an inconsequential event, perhaps a

toilet accident (because the child was so engrossed in play), a lost mitten, or a sleeve smeared with fingerpaint, may loom monumental to the child. If the child seems distressed, teachers must double their efforts to not leave the child with the burden of the explanation. In addition, teachers must guard against the reoccurrence of these or similar events for this child in the future; at the same time, of course, they must try to help the parent, bit by bit, to understand that such mishaps occur among all children; and that they are developmentally "normal" happenstances.

Parent Conferences

The telephone should never be used for formal reporting on a child's overall developmental progress nor for a discussion of problems of a serious nature. Formal reporting of this type should be handled in parent conferences where the parent and the teacher meet together in a private face-to-face conversation. The conferences may be arranged well in advance or hastily arranged in order to deal with a specific problem that has an element of urgency about it.

In general, parent conferences are held on a regular basis, twice or three times yearly (or more often in certain instances) and are scheduled in advance. It is well for teachers to have a regular format in mind and to work quite openly from notes or from the teacher's written progress report which is made available to the parents, too. Conference formats vary from school to school and from teacher to teacher, but all successful conferences should have certain basic components. Following the amenities of greetings and getting comfortably seated, the initial comments should focus on the various developmental areas with the teacher highlighting examples that show in what ways the child is gaining in specific skill areas or has mastered a particular skill. The teacher, for example, might talk about the child using longer, more complex sentences and greater vocabulary variations than at the beginning of school. To illustrate the teacher could read several language

samples (perhaps "before" and "after" samples) to support the assertion. Progress in each skill area - large and fine motor, social, preacademic, self-help - can be touched upon briefly, one after the other.

It is important that teachers encourage parents to ask questions and add their own comments. Such participation often helps them to feel more relaxed during the next stage of the conference where the teacher solicits quetions, comments and expressions of concern from the parents. Many parents are open, even voluble in commenting, questioning, discussing. There are many others, however, who are reticent or unsure about voicing their concerns. Some parents may even be fearful because of a bad history related to ~~certain~~ school experiences and teacher-authority incidents. Still others, especially from certain ethnic backgrounds may consider it inappropriate to do other than to revere their child's teachers; to question the teacher's word about how a child should be educated may be considered tantamount to sacrilege. In these instances the teacher must find ways to help the parent talk more openly with the teacher. A start can perhaps be made simply by commenting on the child's preferences. "Somedays Larry would rather stay indoors and look at books than go out and play." Such a comment often releases strong preferences on the part of the parent pleased, perhaps, that Larry is spending time with books because he does so little of it at home; or the converse, that Larry "always" has his nose buried in a book and should be encouraged to play outdoors with children while at school. For parents such as these who have difficulty expressing their concerns it is particularly important that teachers establish a trusting and positive relationship through frequent non-threatening casual contacts. It may be necessary too, to hold short but more frequent formal conferences in order to help parents who find it difficult to speak up to overcome their reservations regarding what appears to them to be authority situations.

There are times when parents, even the most voluble, may not bring up problems or specific concerns they may have about their child. In these situations, the teahcer may have to take on the difficult task of initiating what may be a sensitive topic. Even more difficult is the situation in which the parents either do not realize, or refuse to recognize, that a problem exists. Extreme tact and care on the part of the teacher is required in such circumstances. Too, the teacher must truly understand the parents backgrounds and values, for what may seem to be a serious problem to the teacher may be quite in keeping with the ways of the family or neighborhood. When such is not the case, and the problem is serious enough to be impeding the child's progress, one of the best ways of helping the parent acknowledge the problem is to arrange for a parent observation.

The close of the conference should start with a brief review of the child's progress and the direction of future learnings. These can be couched in terms of immediate as well as long range goals - for example. "Now that John has learned to put on his own coat and mittens and is working so hard at learning to lace his boots, he should be remarkably self-sufficient with his own clothing by the time he enters kindergarten in the Fall."

If there are several unresolved issues the teachers should suggest that these continue to be observed both at school and at home and that another meeting be scheduled in the near future. This would be a good point at which to invite the parent to make another observation in the school setting. The final statements at the close of the conference must be a reiteration of the child's positive characteristics so that the parents go away feeling good about themselves, the child, the teacher, and the conference.

Parent Observations

Parent observations should occur regularly on either a formal or informal basis. While the teacher may request that the parent observe because of a particular problem, certainly observations should never be limited to those times when the teacher feels that an unrecognized or unacknowledged problem exists. Inviting parents to observe their child in action in the school settings is valuable for everyone - parents, child, and teachers. By observing the preschool in session parents can get a better picture of their child's overall development as well as his or her unique characteristics by seeing their child against the social backdrop of other young children. An additional advantage to inviting parents to observe their child in action at school is that the teacher, as appropriate, can assist the parents in recognizing the positive nuances of their child's developmental gains as well as the child's developmental uniqueness. The teacher too, may explain why certain play and teaching situations were handled in a particular way. If a similiar problem exists at home, the parent and teacher can perhaps compare and work out effective management procedures. Another value of direct observations in the preschool is that parents, seeing actual play materials and activities, often get ideas as to how they might adopt certain experiences to the home setting. One parent, for example, who had watched a cooking experience at school commented that he was delighted with tips he had gleaned as to premeasuring ingredients so the inexperienced child could get the "right" amount when measuring "half a cup". Another parent commented on letting children <u>each</u> take a teaspoonful of Jello granules so they could produce their own individual servings. The use of full size, functional tools for woodworking experiences impressed still another parent. He commented, "It's no wonder Jane could never drive a nail at home; neither could I with a toy hammer." These are the kinds of plans and presentations of materials that good preschool teachers do so well and so automatically. Many parents are quick to pick up on the ideas and appreciate the opportunity to learn as they observe children and teachers in action.

Many parents do not feel comfortable observing in the preschool unless there is structure to the situation. Simple observation forms on which the parent can make notes are often helpful. The forms can be on particular aspects of development or on the child's participation in the various curriculum areas. These notes are often useful in a follow-up discussion, reminding parents of questions to be asked or comments they wish to make in relationship to what they saw. Another advantage in using a simple pencil and paper task is that the parent appears "busy" which allows the child to go about school activities with greater freedom.

Some children do, of course, find it hard to leave the parents' side during an observation, thereby denying the parent the opportunity of seeing the child's normal behavior at school. In some instances it appears that the more the parent or teacher attempt to cajole the child into joining the regular activities the more adamant the child is about not doing so. For the child, good reasons may underlie this reluctance to leave the parent's side - perhaps there are several younger siblings in the home and this is one of the few opportunities the child has to completely monopolize the parent. Whatever the reason, many parents tend to feel the observation is of questionable value if they cannot see their child in action, or they may express concern that such hanging-back may be typical behavior and that their child is therefore deriving little benefit from the preschool experience.

One way to work around the situation is to ask the parent to schedule more frequent observations for awhile so that the child realizes that there will be other opportunities to have the parent without the competition of siblings. These visits can be set up according to a planned format so that they do accomplish the goal, that of allowing the parent to see the child in action in the learning environment. One approach that is almost always successful is to have the parent explain that at first they (the parent and child) will sit together

and watch the other children play; then it will be the parents turn to watch the child play with the other children. The parent can assure the child, "I can stay and watch you play until snack time." If the child does not join a play activity at the appropriate time, (with help from the teacher) the parent matter-of-factly bids the child good-bye, promising to return on another day very soon when the child feels like joining the school activities.

Written Messages

Casual written communications to parents can take many forms. They might be simple reminders about an impending excursion or parent meeting sent home with the child; or a bright, gaily decorated notice posted outside the classroom door reminding parents to save recyclables such as baby food jars, berry baskets, and the plastic trays that so many food items are packaged on. The comments that children sometimes make about their paintings or collages can be written down by the teacher as another way of sharing children's learning experiences with parents. Quick, informal sharing of this type can be extended even further by a brief note attached to another painting saying that Marilyn worked for 20 minutes on this design, or that she worked on three paintings today and this is the one she chose to send home. At parent meetings where parents gather in the classrooms to chat and look at materials, small neatly lettered cards can be set up describing the learnings that children get through blocks, or puzzles, or dramatic play.

There can also be the occasional note sent home with a child reporting on an exciting breakthrough: "Today Jill put on her boots all by herself." "One-liner" notes are useful too, especially when a child and a teacher compose them together. The teacher can start out by asking, "What shall we tell your father you had the most fun with at school today?" and then write down the child's response:

"We got to play in the sprinkler." This form of communication is particularly useful in an infant and toddler program where the children's verbal skills are not sufficiently developed to allow them to tell about their day. It is useful, too, in helping parents learn about what goes on at school from their four or five-year-olds who may typically have little to say in response to parents' inquiry, "What did you do at school today?" The response to such a question is oftentimes, "Nothing," and when pressed, the child may offer, "We played." When pressed even further the child may say, after great pondering, "We had snacks." Such responses are typical of young children who have long since forgotten all about school by dinnertime when such a conversation usually takes place. Memory, however, is quickly revived if the child receives a cue and this is where the brief note mentioned above is so useful - sometimes all it takes to start a stream of recollections is for the parent to mention the sprinkler play talked about in the "one-liner."

Newsletters

Newsletters that go home with some degree of regularity are another form of written communication that most parents appreciate. The most important function of the newsletter is to report the everyday learning activities that have been going on:

> "This week we have been digging up the garden, raking the soil, and planting seeds. We also have been playing garden store. Jane and Sam and Sarah and Larry went to the hardware store with Mrs. Kennedy and bought four new shovels. Larry's father sent some tomato plants to school and we planted them in our garden."

The letter might go on to tell of plans for the coming week, introduce the newly enrolled family, report on children's birthdays or other events, and close with reminders related to such things as special clothing needs occasioned by a turn in the weather or the forthcoming school picnic. Children can and should

be involved in discussions concerning what to include in the letter and teachers should always read the finished letter back to the children before it goes home. Including children in the school-home communications process provides them with a functional prereading activity where they experience their talk turned into writing. This kind of participation also helps children to feel they are an integral part of the school planning and a first-hand, knowledgeable component in the home-school partnership. In all written communications the teaching staff must be sensitively aware of the reading level of their families and their facility with written English. Certainly, in many communities all communications should be bilingual or adopted in various ways for particular families.

The ways in which teachers can communicate effectively with parents through the written word are numerous and limited only by the teacher's ingenuity. The important point is that parents like to know what goes on at school and children are better able to tell about school happenings if parents are provided with a means for prompting and cueing their children.

Parent Participation

The ways in which parents might participate in their child's program are as diversified as are the other methods that have been described for promoting the parent partnership. Participation may range all the way from occasional attendance at parent meetings to assisting in the classroom on a daily or weekly basis. The degree to which parents can be involved in the program depends upon many things - the parent's work and childcare load, available transporation, whether they have what they consider "suitable" clothing; attitudes toward school and teachers. Rarely, in fact almost never, does a low rate of parent participation signify disinterest in the child. Teachers of young children, so skilled at accepting and building upon individual differences in young children, must extend this same understanding and concern to working with parents if optimum learning experiences are to be provided the children. There can be no denying that learning and the

long range maintenance of preschool gains are directly related to the degree of parental involvement in children's learning experiences. Bronfenbrenner (1974) was one of the early people to point this out in his longitudinal analysis of various types of preschool programs. Gray and Klaus (1981) also provide such evidence in their follow up on the youths and families of the early DARCEE years as does Weikart's (1981) follow-up data on the Ypsilanti children.

As mentioned earlier, there are innumerable ways for involving parents. The important point is for a teacher to start where the parent is, to keep trying, without being "pushy", to get the parent involved, and to have faith that parents are doing the best they can at that point in time. One parent whose handicapped child came to school by specially supported transportation each day is a case in point. Teachers had tried for many months to get the mother, a single parent, to come in for an observation or conference. One morning she arrived unexpectedly in her child's taxi. She spent the entire session moving from activity to activity with her child, who was transported with delight at having her there. At the end of the session the mother left in the taxi with the child. She had talked almost not at all during the morning; not to children, nor in response to teachers' comments and pleasantries. The next morning, however, the child arrived with a large bag of cookies of his choice that he and his mother had purchased at the supermarket the night before. Again the child was obviously transported with delight; for the first time he was the purveyor of goodies at school. The mother returned again the next month, and the next, and the next. Each time she arrived unannounced but each time she was a little more communicative. On the third visit, she said that she wished teachers would not call her child Dougie - his name was Doug. The teachers readily assented, overjoyed at evidence of this parent's assertiveness on behalf of something she considered important for her child.

The episode just described brings up the issue of scheduling parents' observations and participation. Certainly scheduled visits are preferred for many reasons:

to avoid too many adults on the scene at once; to prepare the child for a major change in the daily routine; and to make sure that the class or the child is on the premises and not off on a walk or a trip to the store. In spite of the desirability of prescheduled visits, parents should always feel free to drop in on the preschool or daycare program at any time. Unscheduled visits should never be forbidden or frowned upon. The program must be of such a quality that it is open to parents and to the public at all times. Furthermore, parents need the security of feeling that they have access to observing their child at all times. Though an unscheduled observation may result in a minor disruption in the activity of certain children, usually they adapt once they realize that the parent's dropping in is routine. Positive benefits often accrue too. One mother who had very little English came by to drop off a warmer jacket for her child. He persuaded her to stay for music time and to sing with him, a simple song in their native language. With many protestations she did agree. Through the child, the teacher got the mother to help the children and the teachers learn the song and then other songs on subsequent drop in occasions.

Progress Reports

Written progress reports should be prepared and sent to parents on a regular basis. How frequently reports are prepared and sent out depends upon many factors, not the least of which is the ratio of children to teachers. A minimum number of progress reports would probably be two - one, midway of the first half of the school year; the second, midway of the last half.

Progress reports can take a variety of forms. They may be quite formal, following the Individualized Education Program (IEP) format mandated by P.L. 94-142 in the mid-seventies, or they may be quite informal, more of a narrative or ancedotal style. Report formats vary from school to school. Some look at the several developmental areas and report these areas individually or in related pairs - large and small motor skills, the social-affective domain, cognitive-learning

development, self-help and self-management abilities. The ways in which the developmental areas are divided are purely arbitrary (and artifical in terms of actual developmental patterns) and depend usually upon the school's philosophy. Another alternative in preparing progress reports is to divide the areas in terms of the child's participation in particular curriculum areas - free play, preacademics, music, stories, transitions and routines, or in whatever other fashion the day may be divided in a particular center. Within each curriculum area the various developmental skills can then be commented upon. Music: "Jerri knows the words to all of the songs and fingerplays we have been singing." Preacademics: "Jerri can count nine objects arranged in fixed order." Free Play: "Jerri works cooperatively with several children for 15 or 20 minutes at a time on projects such as mural paintings, block building, cooking activities."

After reporting what the child can do and on the progress that has been made, the report can then discuss those learnings that teachers will be helping the child within the coming weeks and months. Using a format such as this ensures that it is seldom necessary for teachers to be negative. Instead of saying that Serena cannot do any of the actions that accompany the songs and fingerplays, the teacher says instead, "Now that Serena knows the words to so many songs we will begin to help her to put actions to the words. During the next few weeks we will have many clapping and jumping activities while we are singing." The "how" is specified to help parents understand that a good teaching sequence would not start with teaching a song calling for complicated actions and to give parents a clue, too, as to simple movement activities they might do at home, should they wish.

Regardless of the format, progress reports should be objective and should talk about specific behaviors: "Isaac knows six colors - red, blue, yellow, orange, purple and black;" or "Kip has a long span of attention for stories. He stays for the entire story period which sometimes lasts for 20 minutes;" or "Lane completes

the entire toileting routine independently."

Never should reports be judgemental or in any way imply criticism of the child or the family. Statements such as the following which may appear innocent enough on the surface can have devastating results: "Sue doesn't seem to know what to do outdoors; perhaps she doesn't get out to play as much as she should?" "John spends all of his time trying to get the men teachers to rough house with him. Is his father still away from home a great deal?" Such comments can intimidate, alienate or anger, depending upon the particular parent. Almy (1975) describes a situation of this type in which a teacher implied that the reason the child was having difficulty with beginning reading tasks was that he might be feeling unloved. Said the parent, "We love him. You teach him." (p. 170). Fortunately, this was a parent who could respond to covert criticism.

Regardless of the form the progress report takes, parent feedback should always be solicited and heeded. The best possible format may be to provide the progress report several days in advance of a scheduled conference so that the parents have time to read and react personally to the report. At the time of the conference, they have had opportunity to formulate questions and raise points about such things as similarities or discrepancies between home and school behaviors.

Sharing Knowledge and Expertise

Teachers, by virture of their training and experience do have a responsibility for sharing their knowledge and expertise in order to help parents learn more about children: how to help children grow and learn and how to respond in order to promote optimum development. At the same time teachers must never attempt to dictate how parents should be raising their children. To do so only alienates or angers parents; and is sure to create a schism between home and school. Let it be stated once more, as it was at the outset of this chapter, that parents are the senior members in the teacher-parent partnership. Providing the child with good

learning arrangements is directly related to teachers' recognition and respect for the status and worth of parents.

Many parents ask for help when they need it. Some do so directly, reporting perhaps that their child has been waking up and crying several times each night for the past two weeks. Other parents may come at their concerns indirectly by reporting how irritable they and their child have been for the past many days. Skillful questioning by the teacher helps to reveal that the child has problems and that the parents, one or the other, are up several times each night and no one is getting enough rest. In this instance the parents did not feel, somehow or other, that the teacher would or should be concerned with a family's sleepless nights thus teachers must always try to "read between the lines." Parents may also ask for help in a variety of other ways - the casual questions at departure time or perhaps a formal request for a conference to discuss their particular concerns.

Responding to requests for help, direct and indirect, formal and informal, have always been a part of the preschool and daycare teachers professional responsibilities. It is likely that this pattern will continue and even increase steadily in the years to come. As society experiences fast moving changes in family styles and structure - women's changing status, maternal employment, rising divorce rate, solo parenting, nontraditional life styles, high nuclear family mobility with the extended family thousands of miles distant - the teachers and caregivers of young children are sure to feel the impact of an increasing need for help and advice from parents. Teachers must be prepared to respond to these requests in ways that help parents work out a solution. The direct approach of telling parents what they "ought" to do, and how they "ought" to do it results in little functional learning for the parent; indeed, the result may be a parent who comes to be overly dependent on the teacher, or a parent who feels like a failure because he or she cannot live up to the teachers' "oughts."

How do teachers respond to parents requests for help? Important first steps are to find out how the parents view the problem, how major it appears to be to them, and what they are having been trying to do about it. The teacher's suggestions are then adapted to conform as much as possible to the parent's viewpoint. With this approach, parents, can apply the teachers information in terms of their own way of doing things. One mother for example was deeply concerned because her three year old son was not saying "please" and "Thank you." The teacher resisted the impulse to jumping in and inform the parent that demanding such verbal amenities from a young three year old was not necessarily oevelopmentally appropriate and that what this parent should be far more concerned about was the child's overall level of verbal delay. Instead, the teacher chatted about the parents' concern about good manners and found that the grandparents were constantly deploring not only the child's lack of good manners but also the mother's ineptness at bringing up a "mannerly" child. By helping the mother learn a simple game to play with her child he learned the required responses quickly and easily. Subsequently an adaptation of the same game was used to help the mother help her child acquire other more functional verbal skills. It is not likely that this latter stage of the teaching partnership would ever have been reached had the teacher dismissed the parents' original concern as developmentally inappropirate trivia.

Parents who do not ask for help

When teachers feel a problem exists that parents do not recognize, the problem must be brought up with tact and careful aforethought in the privacy of a conference. Under no circumstances, however, do teachers label or diagnose. A teacher, for example, may be deeply concerned about a 4½ year old who falls frequently and cannot kick or catch a good-sized ball. From the teacher's experienced observations this looks like a child with a perceptual motor problem. The teacher does not voice these thoughts but instead reports to the parents those behavior just described and asks the parents to observe at home to see if the same things are

occurring. Such reporting on the part of the teacher is often all that is needed to trigger the parent's recognition of having had a vague uneasiness about their child's motor skills which somehow they had not been able to bring into focus until the teacher mentioned the observations of the school staff. In many cases, such recognition is all that is needed for the parents to ask what they can do. Here is where the teacher's knowledge of community resources is so important. Before suggesting something like the perceptual motor clinic for the child just described, it is almost ~~always~~ best, however, for the teacher to suggest that the physician be consulted first. It is the rare developmental problem for which a possible medical base should not be checked out, as a starting point.

Occasionally, a parent does not see or cannot admit that a problem exists; indeed the problem may <u>not</u> exist in the parent's presence as in the following example. The child was a five year old girl who was exceptionally skilled in her social and conversational exchanges with adults. However, at school with children, she was excessively aggressive - hitting children, grabbing their toys, knocking them off climbing equipment and wheel toys. After several weeks of school, with the aggressive behaviors showing no signs of diminishing, teachers arranged a conference and presented the problem to the mother. The mother was not only incredulous but was also angry at the teaching staff saying that they, like the neighbors were maligning her child unjustly. She denied that the child ever had, or ever would, hit another child. As she pointed out, she had observed both formally and informally several times since the start of school and there had been no evidence of aggressiveness on the child's part. The teachers had to admit the accuracy of that statement but knew that it was because the child behaved so sophisticatedly in the presence of adults and especially her parents. On days that her mother had observed, the child had assumed the role of host - showing her mother about, including her in various activities, but interacting not at all with children except to introduce them to her mother.

The problem, however, was acute not only for the child but for the school. Two families who were also in the child's neighborhood, threatened to withdraw their children. They felt they could control hitting at home by not allowing the child in question to play in their house or yard, but were helpless to control for the hitting at school; if teachers would not or could not control the hitting they would have to take their child out of school. To sum up a long case history, arrangements were made for the parent (who demanded proof of the allegations) to observe the play yard from an upstairs office window. The child's behavior was typical of most other days - several physical attacks on children within the first half hour. Once the parent actually came face to face with the problem, solutions could be sought. It seemed that the rigid, adult-like behavior expected of this child in the presence of family members resulted in what might be described as almost an explosion of behavior when she got with children in relaxed play situations. Finding the solution is a long, slow process in cases such as this; usually it means helping parents understand and work toward more realistic expectations for their child while at the same time helping the child to learn different ways of interacting with children in the school situation.

Suspected Abuse

Teachers have a grave responsibility when there is reason to expect that a child is a possible target for abuse. It must be remembered, however, that there is as much potential damage done by jumping to unwarranted conclusions as there is in failing to take the necessary steps to protect a child. Two courses of action are indicated at the first suspicion of possible abuse. One is to date and record any unusual signs or episodes including explanations the child may give about what happened. The second is to seek professional consultation, perhaps the public health nurse (if there is not a school nurse attached to the program) or the community social services. It is important to refrain from acting hastily or in an accusatory fashion - the family may simply remove the child from

the school, or the family from the community. In such an event both the child and the family are separated from much needed help and support that might have been forthcoming through the combined efforts of the preschool program and the social services network. Most communities have protective child and family services with which teachers must become familiar and know how to utilize.

Occasionally teachers will witness incidents between a parent and child that is difficult to allow to go unnoticed in terms of the child's well-being. Obviously great delicacy is required in addressing such a situation. One way is to commiserate with the parent; commenting perhaps on how absolutely infuriating it must be when the child runs in the opposite direction when the mother has just told the child to come to her. The teacher may go on to comment that she knows it is particularly difficult when the child does it again, right after the mother has chased the child and had to spank him for the same offense several times in the last little while. At this point, there is no point in telling the mother how ably and easily the teachers manage the child's non-compliance. To such a claim, correct as it may be, the parent is likely to experience one of several reactions, none of them destined to help her with the problem. A most common reaction is for a parent in this situation to feel inept and defeated, yet one more time. A start on a problem such as this might be to suggest an interim measure that teachers would not approve of ordinarily, perhaps a harness on the child in public places for awhile. The teacher's task in such situations is to follow up and help the parent acquire more effective ways of managing her child in public so that the harness can be dispensed with at the earliest possible opportunity.

Feedback from Parents

An element central to effective sharing between teachers and parents is making sure that teachers get feedback from parents, both casually and formally. Certainly there are many opportunities, several of which we have already discussed - incidental daily contacts, parent observations, responding to progress program

reports, parent meetings. In addition, the parents can be cast in the role of program consultant on occasion as when the teacher asks how it is working out for the car pool by having story time instead of free play just before the end of the half day session. Some parents may feel that their children are much quieter and more relaxed on the ride home and settle down to eat their lunch better. Other parents may notice no difference, but almost all parents appreciate being consulted from time to time.

No matter how open teachers may be about soliciting input, there are some parents who simply do not take advantage of such opportunities to make their wants and preference known. Teachers, however, do not accept this situation without further effort. Ways must be found to assess each family's satisfactions and dissatisfactions with the program itself, and with their own level of involvement. Such assessments which are essentially evaluations of consumer satisfaction can be accomplished through check lists, questionnaires, or observation forms related to specific aspects of the program.

Questionnaires are difficult to design in a way that insures that the response validly reflect the parent's reactions to the program. Some tips can be given, however. It is better, for example, to offer a range of responses along at least a 7-point continuum from "unimportant" to "very important" or from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." A 3- or 5-point scale is considered too restricted to give a true reflection of parents' attitudes. Too, the same question must be asked in more than one way to make sure that semantics are not confounding the results. Consumer surveys from several centers are included in the Appendix.

Parent Education

The term, parent education and parent training, is one that must be used judiciously. For much too long a period the terms were used in an almost denigrating way to convey an implicit message that all parents needed to be "educated"

if they were to fulfill their job as parents. Too often, the education consisted of attempting to inculcate middle class child rearing practices. More recently parent training has come to be used primarily in conjunction with helping parents to learn special skills needed for working with their handicapped or developmentally delayed children. In either event extreme care must be taken to give full recognition to the skills that parents bring to childrearing while at the same time providing education where and when it is needed so that a child's options for learning are not unduly restricted during important early childhood years. Oftentimes this requires an entire family support system as demonstrated by the lasting and positive effects of Head Start on many families.

Thus far in this chapter we have discussed a variety of ways of involving parents in the child learning partnership. Many other ways might be touched upon too - home visits, toy-lending libraries, work parties, and classroom volunteers. For the purpose of this text, however, only one other aspect of parent involvement will be discussed - parent meetings.

Parent meetings can take several forms. One of the most common are large group parent-teacher meetings in which some aspect of child development is focused upon. Usually there is a formal presentation made by one of the staff or by an invited expert. The lecture, for best results, should be followed by group discussion.

Refreshments are often served before or after the presentation with the idea that parents can get to know each other and the teachers better during this kind of an informal period. A classroom open house hour preceding the group meeting is often enjoyed by parents. They can move about freely inspecting and handling play materials and teaching materials. At this time teachers also may choose to demonstrate the use of particular materials in a manner that is fun for all.

Many day care centers have found an early all-family potluck supper to be a success-

ful way of bringing parents together for a short family outing and parent education program. After supper, while children are being supervised or read to by volunteers or paid sitters (cost shared by all parents, so it is minimal) a short film or lecture followed by a question and answer period can be provided for parents. Such an evening can be pleasant for all while ensuring that children get home to bed in good time and parents have time left to relax or do family chores.

Group meetings may also be much smaller in size and less ambition in scope. The participants might be parents who have a common problem or concern - toilet training, language disorders, or behavior problems. Usually one parent will spearhead such a group, getting together other parents with a similar concern. These meetings are usually quite informal and held in the parent's homes on a fairly frequent basis, perhaps as often as once a wekk. One advantage for many parents is that there is greater opportunities for interacting with others. Many parents feel much freer participating in a smaller group. The teacher may or may not serve as a member of such study groups. Usually it is best that the teacher not serve as a regular member or a regular resource person. Teachers cannot spend their evenings conducting sessions for various parent groups and still do a good job with children on a day by day basis. Ideally the teacher can help the parents to locate resource people and the parents themselves can find a group leader within their own ranks.

Parent Complaints

Regardless of how exceptional the program or how skilled and sensitive the teachers, there is bound to be the occasional complaints from parents. These may be global in nature or specific to their own child in a particular, isolated circumstance.

Two of the frequently recurring complaints from parents have to do with discipline and with the work-play dichotomy. Parents often feel that teachers

do not make children mind - that teachers are too permissive. Many parents have reason to believe that their conformity to the demands of authority has paid off for them and they want to protect what they see as their children's futures by teaching them the same code. The teacher usually sees the situation in quite a different light - that the child must learn to make wise self-managing choices within prescribed limits. Similarly divergent are the viewpoints regarding work and play. Many parents feel that they send their children to school to learn, that they can play at home. Efforts by teachers to explain that play is the best vehicle for learning of all kinds, including preacademic skills are often lost in the swamping effect of the work ethic that is so strong in our culture.

In these instances and numerous others where there are cultural and socio-economic differences in what parents and teachers view as optimum learning experiences for children there are no absolutes - no "right" answers and no "wrong" answers. Issues of this nature were discussed in much greater detail in the chapter dealing with significant influences on a child's development. They are mentioned again in the chapter to remind teachers that parents' problems and complaints about the program, whether voiced directly or indirectly, tactfully or angrily, must receive the staff's immediate attention in order to preserve a good learning environment for the particular child and for the program as a whole. Considering the pluralism in many of our communities and the tremendous personality differences among individuals it is truly a good sign that so much goodwill exists among parents and between parents and teachers.

Summary and Conclusion

One of the most important elements in arranging an optimum learning environment for each child is helping parents to be partners in their child's learning. To promote this partnership teachers must keep parents informed about the program and their child's progress within the program. In addition, teachers must request

feedback from parents and be immediately responsive to parents' complaints.

All interactions with parents provide teachers with opportunities to help parents become more knowledgeable about child development, about age level expectancies, the uniqueness of the parents' own child, and ways that they may respond positively to their child's efforts. Interacting with parents can be effective only to the extent that teachers make their recommendations compatible with the beliefs, practices, and cultural mores of the family and to the extent that they view parents as the true experts and final authority where their own child is concerned.

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